DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 391 126 CG 026 773

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TITLE	Finders, Keepers - Knowers, Teachers.
PUB DATE	Jun 95
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Parents as Teachers National Center Conference: "Joining Forces for Young Families" (St. Louis, MO, June 25-27, 1995).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Child Health; Child Rearing; Child Welfare; Coping; Elementary Secondary Education; Health Promotion; *Mental Health; Parents as Teachers; Parent School Relationship; *Personal Narratives; *Quality of Life; Self Efficacy; *Self Management; Teacher Welfare; *Well Being

ABSTRACT

This speech focuses on the ways in which many individuals try to teach others about emotional health and well-being without having accomplished the same for themselves. The speaker posits that some are better talkers than doers because to really find a sense of health and stability, one must forget about oneself; one must become "absent" of self rather than focused on self. Further, a sense of well-being and fulfillment will never be found with the intellect by dwelling on what this personal sense of self thinks it wants, needs, or deserves. There are eight characteristics or attitudes of an emotionally healthy adult: sees what needs to be done and does it; (2) lives life in silent integrity; (3) serves others; (4) is creative and a good problem solver; (5) accepts changes and disruptions; (6) is not influenced by peer pressure; (7) is kind, gracious, courteous, giving and compassionate; and (8) has a sense of humor. Teaching young children and working with their parents is the perfect employment for anyone seeking emotional health because many daily demands are made to forget oneself, so ideas, certainty, and goodness can flow. These demands are what force the practice of this absence of self so fulfillment can follow. Educator attitudes towards the parents of the children they teach create the environment in which parents can learn about children, parenting, and emotional health. The speaker exemplifies this philosophy through discussions of parenting and child behavior. (JBJ)

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FINDERS, KEEPERS - KNOWERS, TEACHERS

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Parents as Teachers Conference

June 1995

St. Louis, Missouri

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FINDERS, KEEPERS - KNOWERS, TEACHERS

Will Rogers once said that "a man can no more teach what he ain't done than he can come back from where he ain't been." If we will be honest with ourselves for a moment, we will have to admit that many of us are trying to teach others about emotional health and well-being but have yet to accomplish it for ourselves. We are better talkers than doers because to really find a sense of health and stability, we must forget about ourselves. We must become "absent" of self rather than focused on self. I realize that this contradicts what is commonly believed to be true, as the common belief is that a strong, positive sense of who we are is good mental health.

It is not that I am suggesting we demean or belittle ourselves, but rather, that we dismiss our personal sense of self because in doing so we will discover that without this sense of self we are far more creative and energetic with a much greater sense of well-being and fulfillment. This sense of well-being and fulfillment is the health we are seeking, but we will never find it with the intellect by dwelling on what this personal sense of self thinks it wants, needs, or deserves.

Let me describe the characteristics or attitudes of an emotionally healthy adult, and you will understand what I mean when I say we have to become "absent" of self.

- A healthy adult sees what needs to be done and he does it. He does not procrastinate, blame, whine, pass the buck, or criticize. He does not need to be praised, thanked, or in some way validated for his efforts.

- A heathy adult lives his life in silent integrity. He does not talk about it; he simply lives it. He is honorable regardless of the circumstances because he knows if honor is forsaken, all else will be lost.

- A healthy adult serves others. He does not serve hierarchies but serves all equally. He willingly gives of his time to causes and endeavors which benefit others.
- A healthy adult is creative and a good problem solver. He often works long hours but is not a workaholic. He thrives on his work because it nourishes and inspires him. He enjoys what he does because he has found his talents and shares them willingly and generously with others.
- A healthy adult accepts changes and disruption. He remains gracious and composed in the midst of chaos. He seeks clarity of issues and solutions to problems.
- A heathy adult is not influenced by peer pressure. In this sense, he is a separatist, but at the same time he is a delightful member of the group.
- A healthy adult is kind, gracious, courteous, giving, and compassionate. He is neither arrogant nor demanding. He does not hold grudges nor does he indulge in character attacks or gossip.
- A healthy adult has a sense of humor and finds pleasure and joy in his life.

One can see that a truly healthy adult does not dwell on himself. He takes good care of his body and mind. He rests his body; he feeds and exercises it well. He keeps his mind open and receptive to new ideas and better ways of doing things. Because he has discovered that he is more than a mental entity and physical form, he dismisses the sense of the personal self to let his physicality and intellect be what they are intended to be: outlets or avenues of expression for his talents and abilities and the inherent qualities of goodness within him. The healthy adult has found who he

truly is: a bundle of talents and a reservoir of inherent qualities of goodness. He knows these talents and this goodness are not unique to him; they are inherent in everyone. He has found that fulfillment comes when his talents are ripened and matured, which can only happen if he shares them willingly. He has also learned that when he acts less than honorably or less than kind and compassionate, the ideas, his talents, vitality and creativity greatly diminish, and he is left feeling empty, barren, and bereft. He has learned that fulfillment must come from within himself, and it does so to the degree that he is able to lose himself and let the creativity and goodness flow forth.

I am reminded of the first winter I spent in an office which had poorly insulated sink pipes. During the first freeze, the pipes burst because I had neglected to leave the water slightly trickling through the pipes, and they froze. We stop the flow through our pipes of well-being when we dwell our ourselves. We freeze and fulfillment eludes until we let ourself thaw and the flow begins anew.

Most of us refuse to thaw, convinced that it is a person or some circumstance that has caused our freeze. A man once told me that he would refuse to speak to his wife again unless she apologized for some unkind act on her part. What he didn't know was that if she didn't apologize, she would freeze; not him. It is so very difficult for us to dismiss the little me(s).

Teaching young children and working with their parents is the perfect employment for anyone seeking emotional health because many daily demands are made upon us to forget ourselves so ideas, certainty, and goodness can flow. These

demands are what force us to practice this absence of self so fulfillment can be ours. How we resist the practice. We are determined to believe that we can have a strong sense of personal me and at the same time have a sense of fulfillment and well-being. It is a myth; believing it to be true and wanting it to be true will not make it so. It is indeed a very painful and difficult lesson for us to learn.

Dismiss the little me, and you will become the healthy adult who knows how he got there. You will also know what it is you are trying to teach and how to let it grow in others because you will have learned that it does grow in an environment which is maintained by someone who has it.

Our attitude towards the parents of the children we teach creates the environment in which parents can learn about children, parenting, and emotional health. Parents are learning what it means to truly love someone more than oneself because their child's safety and well-being has become an integral part of their own sense of safety and well-being. Parents begin their journey with the best of intentions, but they have no way of knowing what they will face or how they will have to change in order to grow until their own parental journey is well underway; that is, when they are in the middle of their hands-on experience of raising children.

Parents want to do a good job. They want to provide security and stability for their children. They want to be loving, patient, and wise. They want their child to have a successful and happy life, but they just don't know how to do this yet.

Good parents are made, not born. There is no magical or automatic transformation that comes because they are now parents. Whether we become

parents at fourteen or forty, we begin a journey we have never before taken, and there is much for us to learn along the way. There are no exit ramps either. We can't leave or stop the journey. It is a new kind of growth, and parents need just as much tender loving care and nurturing as do their children.

Most everything is difficult before it becomes easy for us, and parenting is going to be difficult for a long, long time before a parent gets the hang of it. We know it takes many years to become proficient and competent at other tasks, so why do we think it should take less time to become a confident, knowledgeable, and good-humored parent? The only task more difficult than teaching young children is the task of parenting them!

I am reminded of a trip I once had to make one summer for my father. He wanted me to pick up some crates for him. I left Roswell before the sun came up to head across the Alamorgordo Desert to fetch the crates awaiting me in El Paso. When I arrived, much to my surprise, each of the four crates contained one live goose. I dutifully arranged the crates safely in the back of the station wagon and headed back across the desert in the heat of the afternoon. It would be a hot trip, as this was in the days before cars had air conditioning and we often traveled with a car window open, hoping the breeze would somehow cool things off a bit.

In less than an hour into the return trip, the geese began to peck their way out of the wooden crates. I found myself in the midst of honking, screaming, fighting geese wildly flapping their wings at me and charging at one another as they tried to escape through my open window. The crates were demolished so I had no way to re-

group the situation. I could only continue on, getting madder and madder at the geese. I distinctly remember the moment I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I would survive the trip, but whether the geese made it or not was their decision.

Ten years or so later my sister and I were crossing that same desert with a station wagon full of young children. I turned to my sister and announced, "I'd rather have geese!"

The difference between traveling with geese or children is parents do care whether the children make it or not, so parents will get tired, discouraged, hassled, scared, and angry. However, they are also hopeful, committed, earnest, loving, and capable. If we will recognize that they are trying in earnest and they are sincere in their efforts, they will feel a great burden lifted. They will no longer fear being judged by us to be bad parents. When our attitude is one of respect and trust, we are nurturing them the way they must learn to nurture their children.

When parents are viewed in a positive and supportive way, they are freer to do a better job. As we know for ourselves, when we experience the trust, respect, confidence, and support of others, we correct our shortcomings. No one has to point out to us what needs to be corrected. When we feel safe, it is so much easier for us to ask for help and to listen to that help. The same is true for parents.

Parents need our compassion, our humor, and our patience; not our judgments and blame. They need us to recognize their potential for goodness and competence in order for it to come forth from within them. It is so much easier for one's best to come forth when someone else knows it is there.

Learning to parent probably takes the better part of a lifetime, and we are one of the first teachers for these parents. Let us do our job well. It prepares their soil for healthy adulthood and it maintains ours.

The children we teach need the same support, recognition, patience, and humor from us. Young children are innocent, trusting, loving, and curious; their perceptions of this world and their "logical deductions" are delightful.

A four-year-old girl who was taking her first airplane trip sat next to me on a flight to Los Angeles. She was so excited, eager for this new adventure to begin. The plane taxied down the runway, and it was airborne. The child looked up at me with big, expectant, brown eyes and asked, "When do we get smaller?" To young children, a plane indeed gets smaller as it flies away.

One very hot afternoon, I was observing a group of preschoolers on the playground. Strolling around the yard, I noticed a three-year-old boy on top of the jungle gym intently staring at what appeared to me to be the horizon. As I walked past, he announced with great certainty, "Snow's coming our way!" He was seeing a tin roof reflecting the light in such a way that the roof did appear to be covered with snow. He hadn't yet learned it doesn't snow in 100° temperature so something else must be the cause for this appearance.

Lisa, a four-year-old girl, asked her pregnant mother, "If you were going to have twins, would you have two humps on your tummy?" A good example of how young children try to figure out their world.

Not only are they trying to learn the rules and understand the reasons for the rules, they must at the same time begin their lessons in learning impulse control and delayed gratification. Young children have so much to learn about so many things and circumstances. They do remarkably well considering how new everything is to them. Most adults are still struggling with impulse control and delayed gratification. For example, many adults have quite a difficult time controlling their anger, getting their work done before going to happy hour, passing up the desserts one more time so they can lose ten pounds, or waiting their turn to board the subway. I often wonder how well adults would do if they were transplanted to a strange and foreign planet where everything was new to them; nothing was familiar and their past experiences couldn't help them. Would we be able to learn what we need to learn as quickly as the young children in our classrooms do?

We are much too impatient with young children. Yes, we need to set the limits; yes, we need to teach the rules. However, we must be prepared to patiently help them learn the rules, time and time again. It would be like trying to learn calculus when we haven't yet mastered addition. They need our patience and our vote of confidence. They need our steady, firm, but gentle support as they master the rules and the tasks. It takes a long time to learn what we can do, can't do, and have to do.

Until children are seven or eight years old, they will not be able to see the world as we do. They cannot yet correctly interpret or understand their world and therefore they will have trouble consistently minding the rules by which they must live. They memorize the rules to the best of their ability, and sometimes they remember the rule

and sometimes they don't; sometimes they act accordingly by applying it correctly and other times they don't. It is not because they are stubborn or unreasonable or bad on purpose.

You can see this clearly demonstrated if you first go to watch a group of five-year-olds playing soccer and then go see a team of eight-year-olds play. For the most part, the eight-year-olds understand the rules and apply them appropriately, but the five-year-olds are still struggling to remember them. They often wander off the field because "it's too hot," or they forget which direction to kick the ball because they mostly just want to kick the ball as hard as they can. They cannot yet grasp the concept of passing the ball to a teammate, and if they play backfield, they have great difficulty holding their position once the team is in motion. Much more often than it seems the parents or coaches can bear it, they touch the ball with their hands, or push another player out of the way.

Young children sincerely try to remember all the rules. I remember a four-year-old whose mother was trying to teach her to say please and thank you. Ashley and her mother came for lunch one day, and it was a day of spilling milk for Ashley. Three times she accidently spilled her milk. Her mother looked at her firmly and said, "What do you say, Ashley?" (Mother was wanting Ashley to tell me she was sorry for the messes.) Ashley seriously thought about the answer and suddenly her faced brightened as if she had just remembered the right answer. She innocently replied, "Please, may I have an accident?"

Another delightful story is about a five-year-old girl, chosen to play the part of the innkeeper in the story of Mary and Joseph. At first, Ellen resisted taking the part because she simply didn't think it was right to have no rooms available for Mary and Joseph, and she certainly didn't want to be the one to tell them. Reluctantly she agreed. She memorized her lines to do her part for the Christmas performance. When the time came for her to tell Mary and Joseph, she smiled at them very sweetly and politely informed them that there was no room at the inn, but she then added, "But, why don't you come on in and have a drink anyway?" She was doing her best to mind the rule to be polite and agreeable: a rule she knew applied somewhere.

Think back to the first time you were punished because some adult thought you were bad on purpose. Were you really? I don't think so, at least not the first time. I think you were either hurt, scared, angry, or struggling with impulse control; perhaps you couldn't remember the rule or didn't even know there was a rule you were supposed to know. Aren't you glad the adults didn't give up on you and start labeling you as bad or stubborn or mean? In some areas of your life you are probably still trying to mind some of the rules.

Let us, as teachers, create an environment in our classroom and offices in which anyone who enters will feel the acceptance and the support which encourages his very best to come forth. These kind of encounters, although they may be brief, do indeed last a lifetime!